

DOORS OF THE NIGHT

By Frank L. Packard

An Absorbing Story of
Love, Mystery and Adventure

CHAPTER XII

Billy Kane's eyes lifted from his plate, and fixed in a curious, unresponsive way on White Jack's handsome and unshaven face across the little table. Twenty-four hours he was out in the open sun—"con valent"—twenty-four hours—and as far as Red Vallon and Birdie Rose were concerned, undoubtedly and the underworld generally, there had been not a shred of success. He had unleashed the underworld, but the underworld had picked up and thrown him out. The underworld, clearing houses for stolen goods, the "fences," had yielded up no single one of the robes belonging to the Ellsworth collection, the lead that he had given. Birdie Rose in regard to Birdie, the dead woman had had up to the present at least proved abortive.

Well, perhaps he, Billy Kane, would be more successful! The twenty-four hours had not been wholly fruitless. The night was out there, would be a different story, to tell—perhaps a run and get away. There was one clue which had developed, but a clue that was to be entrusted to neither Red Vallon, nor Birdie Rose, nor any of the pack. Even they, case-hardened, steeped in crime, though they were, might balk at pushing that clue to its ultimate conclusion. They might weaken at the limit. He, Billy Kane, would not weaken, because, as between his own life and the life of one

living still, the matter of that ruby from the Ellsworth collection which had found its way mysteriously to the table in that room—the single stone from the collection that had come to light since the murder two nights ago.

White Jack accepted the unspoken invitation, "Bring another mug of suds," he said.

The glass was replenished. "You seem to have pulled a good job, White," said Billy Kane approvingly. "The 'fence' is next to be on the corner, eh? All right, I know the place. What next?"

White Jack gulped down half the contents of his glass. "I guess I did," he said complacently. "I wasn't pipin' de lay out day for nothing—well, de place has three floors, an' two flats on each floor, savvy? It ain't much of a place, neither. Peter's flat is on de second floor, on de right, as you go up. Dere's nobody at home, but he comes down dere himself to get de place de once. Over one night a week, de family's away somewhere for a vacation, sailing in de ocean breeze at some boardin' house. Giv' say, de guy must have money, 'cause de high brow, out-of-town-indeed, Summer stuff for de family."

Billy Kane nodded. "White Jack finished his glass, and drew his sleeve across his mouth. "Two of de flats is vacant," he said. "One on de second floor, an' one on de top. De other one on de top ever Peter's flat is where dat crazy old fiddler guy, Savak, hangs out off by his lonesome. But Savak won't bother you, none, fies out every night. He goes down to Luchy Verre's jewelry shop, an' him an' Dutch, bent nuts on music, his phinole, goes to it for half de night. Old Savak's got hate in his belly, I guess, but I guess he can fiddle all right. I heard he used to be a big big tradin' some foreign cr-ketra, an' was a count or look or something, an' den he came out here. He ain't livin' like a dook now, an' I guess, if he got his time to stretch up his nose, Bats, dat's what he's got—bats, an' den he got him to play one night down in Heener's music hall, an' he went up in de air an' quit fast 'cause de waters kept circuin' around an' didn't stop de suds while he was playin'. Say, you do youse know about dat?"

"Stick to cases, White," interrupted Billy Kane. "I'm expectin' company. In a few minutes. What about the ground floor? Who lives there?"

"Who does?" said White Jack somewhat contemptuously. "I dunno wot ser lay be, but dere's nothin' dere to bother youse neither. Dere's a couple of sisters about sixty years old a piece on one side, an' a young guy dat's got married to de other."

"Back entrance?" inquired Billy Kane. "Back entrance?"

White Jack shook his head. "None!" he said. "Nothin' dere. Dere's a back yard about four inches square, but de water behind back right an' against it, an' dere ain't no fire. But youse can get in de front door, comin' whether its locked or not, for dere ain't any street lamp enough to do youse any harm."

"Good work!" said Billy Kane. He pushed his plate away from him in front of him. "I guess you'd better bet in on 'White'."

White Jack, of the lesser breed of criminal, self-satisfied familiar to the man he believed to be the Rat and an erstwhile of Crimeland, rose from his chair with evident reluctance. "There's a sort of dog-like faithfulness and

admiration in his eyes, the same devotion to a man that seemed to mark the dealings of everyone in the underworld with the Rat. But the look on White Jack's face was nevertheless one of unguessed disappointment.

"Ain't I in on this any more?" he pleaded. "Ain't I got anything more to do?"

"Yes," said Billy Kane. He lowered his voice. "You've got more to do, and what will count for a lot more than you've already done—less your mouth shut tight."

He leaned across the table and his hand closed in a friendly pressure on the other's arm. "Take the night off. Show up to the morning. Best if you White."

White Jack left the house. The water removed the dikes from the table. Billy Kane leaned back in his chair, and his eyes the impetuous stare back in their depths, travelled slowly over his surroundings. The table, ranged around the sides of the room, were but sparsely occupied; the polished section of the floor in the centre was deserted—it was too early for the votaries of the hump-bug and the turkey-brot to start in on their nightly gratification. Two chairs, "Tashers" were in a state of lethargy, as if it were a few hours later it would awake to a riot of activity, and come into its own with a surging crowd and parked tables, but it was too early for that yet.

Billy Kane's fingers slipped mechanically into his left vest pocket, and hidden there mechanically began to twist a small, hard object, irregular in its shape, between their tips. His face hardened suddenly. The touch of that little object stirred up in an instant a grim flood of speculation. It was the ruby from the Ellsworth collection that he had found on his return to the Rat's den last night. It worried him. How had it got there? Who had put it there? And why? Above all—why?

Only a few hours before, turning his paroled authority to account, he had set the underworld the task of tracing the Ellsworth collection—and mysteriously there had appeared upon his table this single stone, ostensibly identified by a piece cut from one of the original plush trays in which the stones had been kept. The bare possibility that it had been Red Vallon's or some of his breed, who had stumbled upon the stone in their search through the underground, exchanged and had to it there as evidence of a partial success for him to find on his return had occurred to him, but a cautious probing of Red Vallon that morning had put a final and emphatic negative on that theory. Who, then? And why? It had seemed like a ghastly jerg when he had seen that stone there on the table, and the preliminary probing of Red Vallon that he could not force, and against which therefore he said not progress up defence. Did anyone know that he was not the Rat, that desperate, with no other fear, for so he had matched at the robbery, had thrust out to him, and was playing it now? Who, then? The Woman. In Black-Tier acceptance of him as the Rat had been absolutely no gentleman. Not the underling—even a suspicion there would have been followed by a knife that long before this. Not the actual betrayers of



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